United Nations A/HRC/39/NGO/69

General Assembly

Distr.: General
31 August 2018

English only

Human Rights Council
Thirty-ninth session
10-28 September 2018
Agenda item 4
Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2018]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

GE.18-14336(E)

1814336

Please recycle

The denial of the religious plurality by Russian Federation

For one thousand years, Russia has been an Orthodox country, a bulwark against the expansion of Catholicism and other religions. "Russian Orthodox lands" are considered canonical territories where competition by other Christian religions has never been acceptable in the eyes of Moscow Patriarchy.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the development of telecommunications and globalization, the "Russian Orthodox lands" have been more open but also more vulnerable to external influences. Gorbachev had opted for pluralism and fair competition between religions but very soon, reactionary religious and political forces rebuilt a wall of protectionism.

The rejection of pluralism and the persistent lack of tolerance towards the Catholic Church and new religious movements are the background colors of the current religious panorama in Russia. The anti-sect campaigns and legal actions jointly carried out by institutions of the Russian state and by organs of the Orthodox Church pursue one and the same goal: the religious purification of the Russian lands. The fight against Baptists and Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Hare Krishna, Baha'is, Falun Gong, Scientology and many other faith or belief communities is part of that strategy.

The Russian member association of the anti-sect umbrella organization FECRIS (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism), which was created in France in 1994 and is mainly funded by French public powers, is a major actor in a more general plan aiming to reintegrate the lost sheep into the Orthodox Church: Catholics, members of newly implanted religious movements, atheists and non-believers.

The Russian branch of the FECRIS

The Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies, which is FECRIS member association in Russia, was founded in 1993 with the blessing of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II. The Centre is also a missionary faculty department of St Tikhon's Orthodox University in Moscow the objective of which is "to spread credible information on doctrines and activities of totalitarian sects and destructive cults". Since then, A.L. Dvorkin has been the president of this Centre affiliated to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies is the head centre of the Russian Association of Centres for Religious and Sectarian Studies (RATsIRS). The president of RATsIRS is also A.L. Dvorkin; the vice-presidents are Archpriest Alexander Novopashin and Archpriest Alexander Shabanov; the executive secretary is priest Lev Semenov, Ph.D., associate professor.

Apart from the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre, there is a global network of so-called "parents' initiatives" and other similar organizations in Russia the majority of which have become members of RATsIRS in Russia (some are missionary departments of Orthodox dioceses). There are also a number of so-called "rehabilitation centres" which aim at reconverting followers of "non-traditional religions" to Orthodoxy.
FECRIS' member association in Russia and its affiliates are all financed by the Russian Orthodox Church and engaged in the fight against Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Mormons, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, Falun Gong practitioners, Scientologists…

Alexander Dvorkin is well-known for popularising the term 'totalitarian sects', a term used by defenders of the "spiritual security" of Russia to designate peaceful religious denominations considered as potential threats to the hegemony Orthodox Church.

The Spiritual Security Concept and the Laïcité Concept

In the 2000 National Security Concept, the Putin Administration stated:

Assurance of the Russian Federation's national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life, and preserving the cultural heritage of all Russia's peoples. There must be a state policy to maintain the population's spiritual and moral welfare, prohibit the use of airtime to promote violence or base instincts, and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries.

This concept of spiritual security has been used by Russian ideologues of the right and left. In 2003 Viktor Zorkal'tsev, a Communist parliamentary deputy, stated: "Freedom of conscience has boundaries. And these boundaries can be defined by a single expression—spiritual security."

Spiritual security, then, serves as the basis for a campaign based on paranoia of "foreign" enemies and "foreign" ideas, and for measures to unduly restrict freedom of religion or belief of Russian citizens who have decided to follow a non-consensual spiritual path. Members of the FECRIS in Russia play prominent roles in this campaign and in the repressive policy towards religious movements of foreign origin, even when they have been established for a long time in Russia.

Whilst the Constitution and laws in France provide for a total separation of State and religions and the respect of all creeds, the Russian State supports and privileges the Russian Orthodox Church as a key actor in the implementation of President Putin's spiritual security policy.

Concretely, this spiritual security policy goes hand in hand with a religious cleansing policy targeting movements who are perceived as a threat to the identity of the Russian people. Recent examples are: the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses this year, the subsequent imprisonment of a Danish Jehovah's Witness, the jailing of several members of the Church of Scientology, the ban of two peaceful Muslim movements - Tabligh Jamaat and Said Nursi followers -, the misuse of the law against extremism and the Varovaya anti-missionary laws.
The question is "How can France, a secular country, support and finance a French anti-sect organization FECRIS whose vice-president has called for years for such a policy and is part of it in Russia?"

The vice-president of FECRIS approves the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses

Alexander Dvorkin, vice-president of the European antisect organisation FECRIS, supports the ban of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, as he recently declared to the Russian propaganda TV channel Sputnik (https://sputniknews.com/russia/201705211053836265-human-rights-ban-effect).
He clearly endorses the destruction of non-Orthodox minorities. Here is the excerpt of his declarations to the Russian media about the criticisms addressed to Russia concerning the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses :

"Alexander Dvorkin, president of the Association of Centres for the Study of Religions and Sects, told RIA Novosti that these claims are part of a "very aggressive attack against Russia the likes of which we haven't seen in quite a while."

"They're trying to portray it as some kind of campaign against faith. But this is not a campaign against faith because the government cannot regulate people's beliefs, and none of the Jehovah's Witnesses adherents are prohibited from practicing their religion," Dvorkin pointed out.

According to him, the government merely banned a select organization and cut off a substantial flow of money to it - nothing more, nothing less.

"If you so desire, feel free to hold gatherings at your apartments and discuss your religion - no one is going to prevent you from doing so. However, I'm certain that in a few years the number of the organization's adherents will decrease dramatically - by half or to a third of its original size. Because when the financial basis is cut off, along with the ability to freely recruit other people and rent large halls, people tend to quickly lose interest and begin to scatter. In that regard, this decision was very astute," Dvorkin said.

The vice-president of FECRIS attacks Hindus

Source - http://bit.ly/2kWWA0y – Several years ago, there was an attempt to ban the Holy Scriptures of Hinduism. Such a move was only possible because of the actions of anti-sect actors in Russia, including Alexander Dvorkin. Fortunately, in 2011, a Russian court in Tomsk dismissed a claim to ban an edition of the Hindu Bhagavad Gita.
Hindus have accused Alexander Dvorkin of hate speech against their community and their religion. They have also complained that the son of the leader of the Hindu community in Moscow and his family were victims of an attack.

This year on 3rd February a rally was held in the capital of India in front of the Russian embassy. The protesters demanded to stop anti-religious activities of Alexander Dvorkin. They accused him of denigrating their religion and insulting the feelings of millions of Hindus. The protesters in Delhi burned an effigy of Dvorkin, called him an enemy of India and asked Vladimir Putin to protect Hindus from persecution in Russia. (Source: https://sputniknews.com/asia/201702031050325392-hindus-protests-india-russia/)

Conclusions: All communities are concerned about or under threat of the antisect movements in Russia

All non-Orthodox religious denominations and their members have been attacked by Alexander Dvorkin and the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies, which is FECRIS member association in Russia.

Recommendations

This misuse of the Extremism Law against religions has been widely criticized by the UN Human Rights Committee (28 April 2015), the Parliamentary Assembly Monitoring Committee of the Council of Europe (14 September 2012), and the Venice Commission (1 June 2012), which found the law and its use against religions violated human rights and called on Russia to correct the law. Over fifty cases regarding Russia's misuse of the Extremism Law against religions have been filed by numerous religious groups before the European Court of Human Rights.

CAP Liberté de Conscience recommendations to the Russian Federation are:

- to implement the following reports :
  - Human Rights Committee Report, Kazakhstan, CCPR/C/Kaz/Q/1, 2 September 2010,
  - Report, UN Special Rapporteur, Freedom of Religion or Belief, Para 25, HRC 19/60, 22 December 2011,
  - , OSCE and Venice Commission Guidelines for Review of Legislation Pertaining to Religion or Belief, page 16.
  - European Union Guidelines on the Promotion or Protection of Religion or Belief, Para. 40 -41.

- to respect the article 18 of the UDHR, and to respect the religious plurality.